Newsletter of Deccan Birders (formerly Birdwatchers' Society of Andhra Pradesh)
New Series Volume 16 Number 12 December 2019

INDOOR MEETING: Talk on "The centipede's sanctuary: biogeography and diversification of the Western Ghats biota" by Dr Jahnavi Joshi. Tuesday, 3rd December 2019, 6.30PM: Goethe-zentrum Hyderabad, 20 Journalist's Colony, Road No. 3, Banjara Hills, Hyderabad – 500034. (For directions, please contact 94905-09251 or 040-65526443/23350040)

For the past two centuries, one of the main endeavours of evolutionary biologists has been to understand the origins of biological diversity, i.e. how plants and animals proliferated across the world. Increasingly over the past decade, researchers have used molecular tools (DNA sequences) together with morphological and climate data to characterize species, and draw on that information to elucidate the process of species' origins.

Jahnavi Joshi, Project Scientist, Centre for Cellular and Molecular Biology, is an evolutionary biologist and studies arthropod diversity and its evolutionary origins in the tropical forests of peninsular India. She will talk about the biodiversity of the Western Ghats and its evolutionary origins, focusing on centipedes, which are ancient predatory arthropods. Do make it a point to attend this interesting talk.

INDOOR MEETING: Talk on "Emerging threats to Indian Birds - Challenges of Conservation" by Dr Asad Rahmani. Thursday, 12th December 2019, 6.30PM: LACONES (Laboratory for Conservation of Endangered Species), Sai Hills Colony, Rambagh Colony, Hyderabad.

Dr Rahmani is the former Director of the prestigious Bombay Natural History Society. He has authored 22 books and published 150 peer reviewed scientific papers. His main interest is in grassland and wetland birds. Do utilise this opportunity to listen to Dr Rahmani who is a veritable reservoir of information on birds.

OUTSTATION TRIP: 14th-22nd December 2019: Sattal & Mandal (Chopta), Uttarakhand. Trip Coordinators: Srikanth Bhamidipati (Mobile: 9738840070); Sudhir Moorti (Mobile: 9652283335)

Nestled in the foothills of the Kumaon & Garhwal Himalayas respectively, Sattal & Chopta are well-known birding hotspots. With winter in full swing, besides the resident species, good sightings of winter species can be expected. Seats are limited. Please contact the coordinators to book your seat, as well as for further details regarding the trip.

FIELD TRIP: Sunday, 22nd December 2019: Ameenpur Lake. Meeting point: Opp. Mangatrai Pearls, Punjagutta, 6.30AM. Trip Coordinator: Sagarika Melkote (Mobile: 984839701)

Ameenpur Lake covers an area of 93 acres and is located in Sanga Reddy Distirct. This man-made lake was reportedly constructed more than 300 years ago during the reign of Ibrahim Qutub Shah. Ameenpur is surrounded by undulating terrain with rocky outcrops and formations in the midst of an urban sprawl, and is a very popular birding site, housing a range of resident and migratory birds. This would be a half-day trip. Carry water, breakfast and rain gear. As always, we will be car-pooling, so please let the coordinator know if you need a ride, and also if you can accommodate any others in your vehicle. Members are requested to wear their Deccan Birders ID cards. Non-members are most welcome; however, they are requested to contribute Rs. 100/- per person to the Deccan Birders kitty. Our new T-Shirts and Caps will be available for sale; T-Shirts are Rs. 450/- each and Caps are Rs. 250/-. Also, as always, please avoid plastic carry bags and containers.

We wish all our members a very happy and prosperous New Year 2020

SOLITARY BIRDING

Trip Report – Desert National Park & Khichan, October 2019

Text and Photos: Sravan Kumar R

Great Indian Bustard in its habitat

In the month of October, a trip to Rajasthan was planned, following the trip to Rollapadu, with Deccan Birders. I felt comfortable with the warmth of Rajasthan at 36-40 °C; an escape from the extended rains in the Deccan region. I was accompanying a friend on work to Jaisalmer. Soon we wound up our work and my friend returned to Hyderabad. I stayed back, extending my trip by three more days, to visit some well-known IBAs nearby, the Desert National Park (DNP) and Khichan. This was my first visit to the desert landscape.

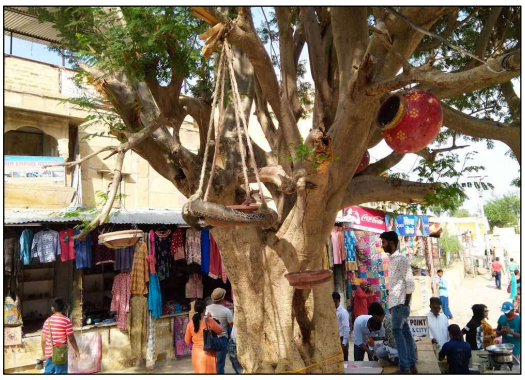
White-eared Bulbul and House Sparrow

Egyptian Vulture

Earlier, the other day *en route* to work at Ramghar village, 65km from Jaisalmer, we had observed Common Babbler (*Turdoides caudata*), White-eared Bulbul and House Sparrows (*Passer domesticus*) quenching their thirst at a ditch formed by an underground pipeline leakage. Now, on the way to Jaisalmer city, we were greeted by an Egyptian Vulture (*Neophron percnopterus*) flying overhead across the road and a White-eared Bulbul (*Pycnonotus leucotis*).

Common Buzzard

The birds here are so habituated to human presence that they feed unconcerned at the feeders hung up on trees in the middle of congested, busy areas. They even nest in the pots provided on the trees!



House Sparrow at a feeder in a busy area

A walk along the canal (Indira Gandhi Irrigation canal) yielded Eurasian Collared Doves (*Streptopelia decaocto*) (more in number than others from the family), Common Buzzard (*Buteo buteo*), Common Babblers in the woods and scrub along the canal, Common Sandpiper (*Actitis hypoleucos*), Red-wattled Lapwings (*Vanellus indicus*), White Wagtail (*Motacilla alba*), Red-naped Ibis (*Pseudibis papillosa*), Grey Herons (*Ardea cinerea*) and Brahminy Kites (*Haliastur indus*).

Red-naped Ibis

Grey Heron

At a very shallow pond, an Egyptian Vulture and a group of 6-8 Pallid Harriers (*Circus macrourus*) were seen relaxing by perching on ground in the shades of *Calotropis* bushes, and Tawny Pipits (*Anthus campestris*) and Crested Larks (*Galerida cristata*) on the grass and in the bushes.

Tawny Pipit

Eurasian Roller

Southern Grey Shrike

On the way to Laungewala Yudh Sthal (Indo-Pakistani war of 1971), 108km from Jaisalmer, Eurasian Rollers (*Coracias garrulus*) and Southern Grey Shrikes (*Lanius meridionalis*) were recorded perched on electric wires and feeding on a swarm of locust nymphs prevailing at that time (a serious agriculture pest issue in the region). We also observed that the locusts were cannibalizing road kills of their own kind!

Desert Locust

Desert (or Red) Fox

Nilgai

During the return to our station in the twilight hours, a Desert (a.k.a. Red) Fox leapt into our way from the desert sand dunes and we also came across a Nilgai on the Ramghar village periphery.

A day before I started for DNP, I visited the Divisional Forest Officer (DFO), DNP office at Jaisalmer for general introduction and enquiry. During my conversation with the DFO, I was told that DNP would be closed for visitors for another two months as it was the breeding period of Great Indian Bustard (GIB( )गोडौन्(, but that a portion of DNP was open for researchers with permissions from Divisional Officer, DNP at Sudasaree. As suggested by the DFO, I went with the officer and his team at Sudasaree village near Sam. I was also told that the area under DNP was being expanded by securing and adding new locations that had been recorded for GIB nesting. The Rajasthan Forest Department had also established a conservation unit at Sam to monitor the Bustards and established artificial incubation units as a part of the GIB conservation program.

Brown Rock Chat

In the evening, along with my friend, I visited Gaddisar Lake in the city, which is a tourist spot. However, being obsessed with birds, I observed that the structures at the lake were completely infested with Common Pigeons (*Columba livia*), a few Cattle Egrets (*Bubulcus ibis*) and Grey Herons perched on trees in the water. As a stray flash flickered, I also observed four Brown Rock Chats (*Cercomela fusca*) inhabiting a private property next to the lake.

Sudasaree, DNP: Sudasaree village is located 15km from Sam village which is 45km from Jaisalmer. Public transportation was infrequent and hiring a taxi would be heavy on the pocket and I wasn't sure of the time I would spend at the location. Hence, I extended the rental period of the bike I was using and started early with a hope of reaching within an hour. But I ended up birding on the way! Driving down, I was reminded of the movie, "Edge of Tomorrow", seeing sand dunes, sparse population and distantly occurring villages.

At the entrance to Desert National Park, Sudasaree

Just after turning in from Sam towards Sudasaree, a small water body was quenching the thirst of a White-rumped Vultures (*Gyps bengalensis*) and some cattle. I came across eagles, vultures and harriers along the way.

White-rumped Vulture

Cattle at a waterhole

I reached Sudasaree by 11:30AM. It was a picturesque and tranquil place, with yellow grassland in the background and sparsely grown green bushes of *Euphorbia* species, that filled the heart with pleasure.

The camp at Desert National Park, Sudasaree

An army personnel on his day off was relaxing at the gates. The team had been deployed to help the Forest Department in guarding the DNP. Accompanied by a Forest Department staff, I went inside the National Park for only a small distance (as it needs skill to drive a two-wheeler on the slippery sand) and sighted Variable Wheatear (*Oenanthe picata*), Desert Wheatear (*Oenanthe deserti*), Black-crowned Sparrow Lark (*Eremopterix nigriceps*), Greater Short-toed Larks (*Calandrella brachydactyla*), Chinkara (Indian Gazelle) and Nilgai.

Variable Wheatear

Desert Wheatear

Chinkara (Indian Gazelle)

One time, a Black-crowned Sparrow Lark that I was observing made a quick leap to a wasp flying with a caterpillar and stole it from the claws of the wasp! The wasp swooped down, following a little behind the Lark (as if, in shock) and soon took off. The caterpillar was beaten and consumed by the Lark; unfortunately the action was too quick to capture with my camera.

Black-crowned Sparrow Lark with caterpillar

In the evening, accompanied by another person (an expert in driving a two-wheeler in the sand), I went outside the National Park, trying to cover as much terrain as possible. A swarm of locusts was seen flying across.

Swarm of locusts

Great Indian Bustard

At the end of the day, I felt blessed for the delightful sight of GIBs (which I had missed at Rollapadu) – four individual females were sighted entering the protected area, flying over the fence from the adjoining agricultural fields.

Great Indian Bustards flying in

Indian Fox

As it darkened, a pack of five Indian Foxes approached the army camp and waited for the left-over *chapatis*. At night, the temperature fell to accord a comfortable sleep under the clear sky with a tangential line of the Milky Way (I missed my wide-angle lens for the star trail, though). Throughout the night, the wind carried sounds from the grassland that were heard whenever the sleeping bag slipped off my ears.

Sunrise in the country's west happened at 6:59AM. This same time last year, I had witnessed the sun rise in Nagaland at 5:30am (Amurs were out from the roosts)! Having got ready for another day around the park, I observed a Short-toed Snake Eagle (*Circaetus gallicus*) preening the flight feathers, getting ready for its first flight of the day.

Short-toed Snake Eagle

Laggar Falcon pair mating

All of a sudden, a pair of Laggar Falcons (*Falco jugger*) came flying from behind us. The female positioned herself on a tree branch and the male followed her, hovering above her and gradually descended and mated with her.

Isabelline Wheatear

Variable Wheatear was recorded from day 1, mobbing Desert Wheatears and Isabelline Wheatears (*Oenanthe isabelline*). There was no sign of the GIB.

Richard's Pipit

Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse

On the way from Sudasaree to Sam, I spotted Egyptian Vulture, Southern Grey Shrike and Richard's Pipit (*Anthus richardi*). Flocks of Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse (*Pterocles exustus*) were performing a morning drill, shuttling between the barren land and adjoining shallow waterbody.

Montagu's Harrier

Pallid Harrier

Montagu's Harrier (*Circus pygargus*), Pallid Harrier (*Circus macrourus*) and Lesser Kestrel (*Falco naumanni*) were following and disturbing the perched flocks. On the way back to Jaisalmer I sighted a Greater Spotted Eagle (*Aquila clanga*) flying high above the rocky terrain.

Lesser Kestrel female

Greater Spotted Eagle

With extended time at DNP, I missed a train from Jaisalmer to Phalodi-Khichan and then to Jodhpur. So, I took a bus to Jodhpur, reserved my accommodation at a hostel and enquired about bike rentals to go to Khichan (170km from Jodhpur) in the early hours of next day. Unfortunately, the suppliers did not rent bikes to go outside Jodhpur city and the online portal was open only till 8:00PM. The only other option was by train, which would take me to Phalodi by 2:30AM. Another 5km and I could reach Khichan village. A co-traveler I had befriended in the train accompanied me to the bus station, but I learned that the buses would start only after sunrise. Waiting there with the mosquitoes was very hard.

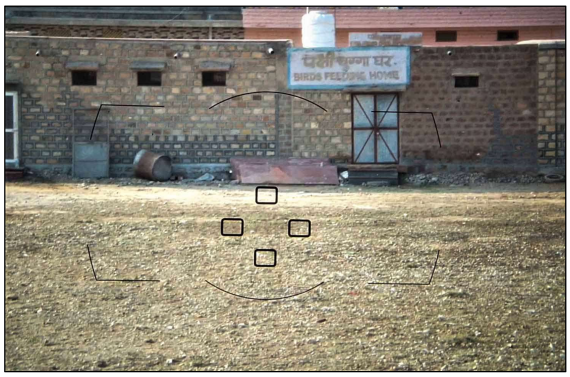
Unable to wait any longer, at 4:50AM, I started walking with the help of Google Maps. Within a few minutes, I had reached the outskirts of Phalodi, and beyond that it was completely dark. I continued walking in the cold breeze and the moonlit night on *Prosopis* tree-lined avenue. It reminded of the Nilgai that bounced onto the way at Ramghar, hence I was on high alert. The stray dogs were pretty cool; they obeyed orders with a single word "*thaamo... thaamo*"!

I reached Khichan by 5:35AM. It was still too dark to enter the village and I didn't want to risk being challenged by the villagers who may have mistaken me for a rogue. A little friend helped fill the gap till dawn – Ram Sukh, an 11-year-old boy, studying in Std 8 at the Government school, Khichan, and his grandpa who were waiting at the bus stop from 4:00AM.

Demoiselle Crane flock flying into Khichan

Khichan: Around 6:30AM, Demoiselle Cranes (कुर्जा) flew in with their trumpeting calls, in a "V" formation. The birds flew all over the village creating such a racket that the entire village woke up. Comparatively, this was much louder than the Telineelapuram Pelicanry, where the only sounds come from Painted Stork nestlings begging for food from the parent birds and the bill-clapping of adult Grey Pelicans and Painted Storks.

Supported by the village panchayat, a secure area has been set aside for the birds to feed and is fenced in all directions; they are fed with grains here.



The Demoiselle Crane feeding area

When I got ready to click a few good pictures, I found my memory card adapter was missing – I had left it with the laptop after I transferred the old images at Jodhpur! Though I had extra micro-SD cards, they were not useful without the adapter. I was reminded of Sudhir Moorti's article in the Pitta (October 2018, "Birding is for Cuckoos"), that gave a hilarious description of the mental state of a birder in various unforeseen situations.

Demoiselle Cranes feeding

Anyway, I managed to make a 'bridge' by aligning the camera's viewfinder to the mobile camera and managed to take some photos, which I was also able to share with friends on social media soon from the location.

Demoiselle Cranes

The birds were seen flying over the village till 8:30AM after which they left for the waterbodies. "They'll return in the afternoon when they'll be fed," said Mr Sevaram Malli Parihar, a resident of the village, who is a wildlife enthusiast and has received many awards for his service towards the bird life in the vicinity. "A total of ~7000 Demoiselles had arrived till date and more would arrive (~10000)", said Mr. Sevaram.

The photos might not have come out so great, but I was happy with my effort, given the circumstances. Having had my fill of lifers, I packed up my tools and returned to Jodhpur, and the next day I started for Hyderabad.

Birding alone wasn't a new experience for me – the times spent for my doctoral studies were mostly solitary until I moved to Hyderabad. But it was after a long time that I had travelled alone again, a solitary birder, accompanied by the imaginary voices of my friends.

I would like to express my gratitude to my sponsors, Kosher Climate Private Limited, Bangalore, for their concern towards Ecology and Wildlife. My thanks also to Anita, Gowthama, Srikanth and Sudhir from Deccan Birders for helping me in confirmation of bird identities from a landscape that was new to me.

The complete list of birds seen during the trip is given below:

Sl. No	Common Name	Scientific Name	Sl. No	Common Name	Scientific Name
1	Ashy Prinia	Prinia socialis	46	Laggar Falcon	Falco jugger
2	Asian Koel	Eudynamys scolopaceus	47	Large-billed Crow	Corvus macrorhynchos
3	Asian Openbill	Anastomus oscitans	48	Large Egret	Ardea alba
4	Asian Palm Swift	Cypsiurus balasiensis	49	Large Grey Babbler	Turdoides malcolmi
5	Asian Pied Starling	Lamprotornis bicolor	50	Laughing Dove	Spilopelia senegalensis
6	Barn Swallow	Hirundo rustica	51	Lesser Kestrel	Falco naumanni
7	Baya Weaver	Ploceus philippinus	52	Little Cormorant	Microcarbo niger
8	Black-crowned Sparrow Lark	Eremopterix nigriceps	53	Little Grebe	Tachybaptus ruficollis
9	Black Drongo	Dicrurus macrocercus	54	Little Swift	Apus affinis
10	Black Kite	Milvus migrans	55	Little Swift	Apus affinis
11	Black-shoudered Kite	Elanus axillaris	56	Long-legged Buzzard	Buteo rufinus
12	Black-winged Stilt	Himantopus himantopus	57	Montagu's Harrier	Circus pygargus
13	Blue Rock Pigeon	Columba livia	58	Paddyfield Pipit	Anthus rufulus
14	Brahminy Kite	Haliastur indus	59	Pallid Harrier	Circus macrourus
15	Brown Rock Chat	Cercomela fusca	60	Pied Bushchat	Saxicola caprata
16	Cattle Egret	Bubulcus ibis	61	Plain Prinia	Prinia inornata
17	Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse	Pterocles exustus	62	Purple-rumped Sunbird	Leptocoma zeylonica
18	Common Babbler	Turdoides caudata	63	Purple Sunbird	Cinnyris asiaticus
19	Common Buzzard	Buteo buteo	64	Red-naped Ibis	Pseudibis papillosa
20	Common Kestrel	Falco tinnunculus	65	Red-vented Bulbul	Pycnonotus cafer
21	Common Myna	Acridotheres tristis	66	Red-wattled Lapwing	Vanellus indicus
22	Common Sandpiper	Actitis hypoleucos	67	Richard's Pipit	Anthus richardi
23	Common Tailorbird	Orthotomus sutorius	68	River Tern	Sterna aurantia
24	Crested Lark	Galerida cristata	69	Rosy Starling	Sturnus roseus
25	Demoiselle Crane	Anthropoides virgo	70	Rufous Treepie	Dendrocitta vagabunda
26	Desert Wheatear	Oenanthe deserti	71	Shikra	Accipiter badius
27	Egyptian Vulture	Neophron percnopterus	72	Short-toed Snake Eagle	Circaetus gallicus
28	Eurasian Collared Dove	Streptopelia decaocto	73	Southern Grey Shrike	Lanius meridionalis
29	Eurasian Roller	Coracias garrulus	74	Spotted Dove	Spilopelia chinensis
30	Great Indian Bustard	Ardeotis nigriceps	75	Steppe Eagle	Aquila nipalensis
31	Greater Coucal	Centropus sinensis	76	Tawny Pipit	Anthus campestris
32	Greater Short-toed Lark	Calandrella brachydactyla	77	Variable Wheatear	Oenanthe picata
33	Greater Spotted Eagle	Aquila clanga	78	White-browed Fantail	Rhipidura aureola
34	Green Bee-eater	Merops orientalis	79	White-browed Wagtail	Motacilla madaraspatensis
35	Grey Francolin	Francolinus pondicerianus	80	White-eared Bulbul	Pycnonotus leucotis
36	Grey Heron	Ardea cinerea	81	White-eyed Buzzard	Butastur teesa
37	House Crow	Corvus splendens	82	White-rumped Vulture	Gyps bengalensis
38	House Sparrow	Passer domesticus	83	Wood Sandpiper	Tringa glareola
39	Indian Grey Hornbill	Ocyceros birostris	84	Yellow-billed babbler	Turdoides affinis
40	Indian Nightjar	Caprimulgus asiaticus			
41	Indian Peafowl	Pavo cristatus		**Mammals**	
42	Indian Pond Heron	Ardeola grayii	1	Chinkara (Indian Gazelle)	Gazella bennettii
43	Indian Robin	Copsychus fulicatus	2	Desert Fox (aka Red Fox)	Vulpus vulpus
44	Indian Silverbill	Euodice malabarica	3	Indian Fox	Vulpus bengalensis
45	Isabelline Wheatear	Oenanthe isabellina	4	Nilgai	Boselaphus tragocamelus

Some other birds photographed during the trip:

Long-legged Buzzard

Laggar Falcon displaying

Steppe Eagle

Egyptian Vulture juvenile

Rosy Starling flock

White-browed Fantail

Sun Spider

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BIRDING IN MANIPUR

Text and Photos: Wg Cdr Yella Prakash Rao

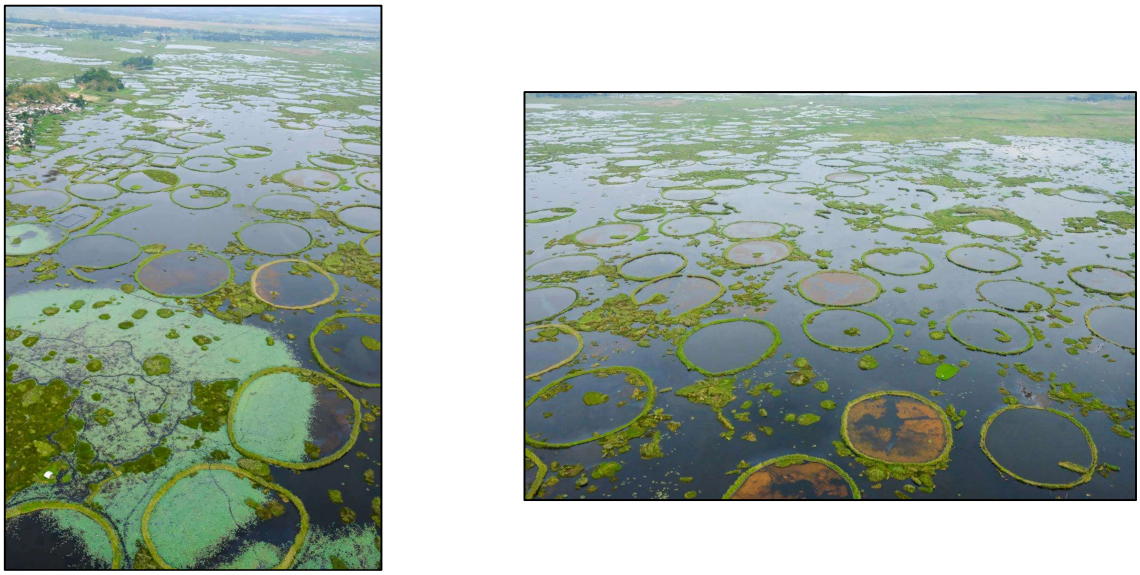
Loktak Lake, Manipur

Manipur is one of the seven sister states of North-east India and has a unique terrain unlike the others. The uniqueness is evident from the fact that it has a large oval-shaped valley, surrounded by blue mountains, with an average elevation of 2500 feet at the valley bottom and rising to an average of 5000 feet on the rims. Thus, the state has a diverse mix of birds owing to its terrain.

I frequently visit Imphal, the capital city, and its surroundings as part of my work. This report is the result of a few weeks of birding across the state during the months of August and November. The areas covered include the city of Imphal and surrounding hills, the airport zone, Kangla Fort, Loktak Lake and Keibul Lamjao National Park. Kangla Fort, in the heart of the city, has a large repository of flora and fauna owing to it being protected from general public.

Jungle Cat at Kangla Fort

The Loktak Lake, known for its vast expanse and the floating biomass called '*Phumdis'*, is an important birding area in the state. This lake has been designated as a Ramsar wetland.



The Phumdis at Loktak Lake

The lake has seen deterioration owing to human intervention and exploitation. The number of migratory birds visiting the lake has reduced considerably over the years, primarily due to the presence of human settlements on the lake over the *Phumdis*. However, large flocks of Brown-headed Gulls (*Chroicocephalus brunnicephalus*) and Lesser Whistling-ducks (*Dendrocygna javanica*) have been seen in and around the lake area.

Sangai Deer juvenile

The Keibul Lamjao National Park is located on the South-west edge of the lake and covers an area of 40 sq km. This park is home to the endemic Sangai Deer. The entire park area is a floating bed of grass and biomass. One can actually experience the feeling of jumping over a water mattress on this biomass! A large number of native birds have taken shelter in the park and are believed to be thriving.

Tamenglong, a hill district, supports the Amur Falcon (*Falco amurensis*) migration. A few villages in this district are known to be protecting the last of the Great Hornbills (*Buceros bicornis*) as well. The most common birds found here are the Barn Swallow (*Hirundo rustica*) and the Eurasian Tree Sparrow (*Passer montanus*). The common House Crow and House Sparrow are conspicuous by their absence.

Barn Swallow

Eurasian Tree Sparrow

The list of birds seen during the period is given below:

Sl No	Species Name	Sl No	Species Name	Sl No	Species Name
1	Eurasian Tree Sparrow	22	Intermediate Egret	43	Brown-headed Gull
2	Asian Koel	23	Purple Heron	44	Common Hoopoe
3	Indian Cuckoo	24	Oriental Magpie Robin	45	Burmese Shrike
4	Indian Roller	25	Red-vented Bulbul	46	Brown Shrike
5	Black-winged Kite	26	Lesser Coucal	47	Blue-throated Barbet
6	Streaked Weaver	27	Common Stonechat	48	Coppersmith Barbet
7	Black Drongo	28	Black-tailed Crake	49	Black-naped Oriole
8	Crimson Sunbird	29	Black Kite	50	Common Kingfisher
9	Rufous-necked Laughingthrush	30	Black-eared Kite	51	Large-billed Leaf Warbler
10	Barn Swallow	31	White Wagtail	52	Siberian Rubythroat
11	Common Myna	32	Citrine Wagtail	53	White-throated Kingfisher
12	Asian Pied Starling	33	Spotted Munia	54	Zitting Cisticola
13	Great Myna	34	Common Moorhen	55	Common Iora
14	Chestnut-tailed Starling	35	Osprey	56	Fulvous-breasted Woodpecker
15	Lesser Whistling-duck	36	Mountain Hawk Eagle	57	Plain Prinia
16	White-breasted Waterhen	37	Himalayan Buzzard	58	Red-wattled Lapwing
17	Common Tailorbird	38	Shikra	59	Oriental White-eye
18	Mountain Tailorbird	39	Eurasian Wryneck	60	Blue-tailed Bee-eater
19	Spotted Dove	40	Striated Grassbird	61	Ashy Woodswallow
20	Cattle Egret	41	Hodgson's Redstart	62	Paddyfield Pipit
21	Small Egret	42	Whistler's Warbler	63	Rosy Pipit

Some other birds photographed during the trip:

Rufous-necked Laughingthrush

Black-tailed Crake

Ashy Woodswallow

Red-wattled Lapwing

Eurasian Wryneck

Crimson Sunbird

Common Stonechat female

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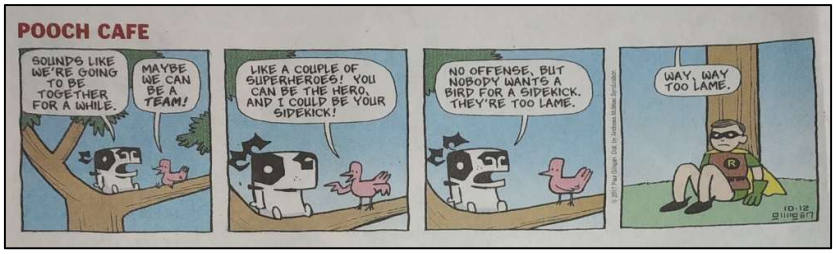
Bird Humour

Umesh Mani


POOCH CAFE
SOUNDS LIKE WE'RE GOING TO BE TOGETHER FOR A WHILE.
MAYBE WE CAN BE A TEAM!
LIKE A COUPLE OF SUPERHEROES! YOU CAN BE THE HERO, AND I COULD BE YOUR SIDEKICK!
NO OFFENSE, BUT NOBODY WANTS A BIRD FOR A SIDEKICK. THEY'RE TOO LAME.
WAY, WAY TOO LAME.

(From The Hindu, October 12, 2017)

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Bird of the Month

Text and Photos: Umesh Mani

Black-capped Kingfisher (*Halcyon pileata*)

Black-capped Kingfisher (Krishna Delta, January 5, 2019)

Order: Coraciiformes
Family: Alcedinidae
Genus: *Halcyon*
Species: *H. pileata*
Size: 28 cm

Description & distribution: The Black-capped Kingfisher is a tree kingfisher with a distinctive black head and shoulders contrasting with a dirty-white collar and throat, coral-red bill, and deep cobalt-blue back and wings. Underparts are rufous-orange with the patchy white of the throat extending down the breast, while the legs are bright red. In flight, it shows large white 'mirrors' at the base of the primaries, which are diagnostic. The sexes are alike, with the juvenile a duller version of the adult and with streaks on the throat.

The Black-capped Kingfisher is found in India (including remote islands of Andaman & Nicobar), Bangladesh, Thailand, Myanmar, parts of China, Philippines, Sri Lanka, the Malay Peninsula, Borneo and Sumatra east up to Sulawesi. Pakistan has also had some reports of winter vagrants.

Habitat & behaviour: The Black-capped Kingfisher is usually seen singly in coastal and mangrove habitats, creeks and estuaries, although it is occasionally seen inland too, away from usual range, as a result of movements related to rainfall. It is usually seen perching on conspicuous, exposed perches, while it waits to dive and catch fish; its diet also includes large insects, crabs, frogs, lizards, beetles and even bees and wasps. It is easily disturbed, and tends to move away when approached. Its flight is fast and direct, and one can easily hear the whirring of the wings as it flies past. Its call is a cackling *ki ki ki ki ki*, similar to, but shriller than, the call of the White-breasted Kingfisher.

Nesting: The Black-capped Kingfisher breeds generally between May and July. The nest is a tunnel in the earth-bank of a river or creek, ending in a wider egg chamber. The usual clutch consists of 4-5 spherical white eggs.

Local name: The Black-capped Kingfisher is known as *'Kourilla'* (a name used for all Kingfishers) or *'Kala kilkila'* in Hindi, *'Kappu taleya meenchulli'* in Kannada, *'Kalya topicha khandya'* in Marathi, and '*Krishna meelran'* in Sanskrit.

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